

► Reading Poetry in the Middle Grades

20 Poems and Activities That Meet the Common Core Standards and Cultivate a Passion for Poetry

Paul B. Janeczko

Heinemann
Portsmouth, NH

Heinemann

361 Hanover Street
Portsmouth, NH 03801-3912
www.heinemann.com

Offices and agents throughout the world

© 2011 by Paul B. Janeczko

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the publisher, except by a reviewer, who may quote brief passages in a review, and with the exception of reproducibles (identified by the *Reading Poetry in the Middle Grades* copyright line), which may be photocopied for classroom use.

“Dedicated to Teachers” is a trademark of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Janeczko, Paul B.

Reading poetry in the middle grades : 20 poems and activities that meet the common core standards and cultivate a passion for poetry / Paul B. Janeczko.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-0-325-02710-4

ISBN-10: 0-325-02710-2

1. Poetry—Study and teaching (Middle school)—United States. 2. Creative writing (Middle school)—United States. 3. Language arts—Correlation with content subjects. I. Title.

LB1631.J366 2011

808.1071'2—dc22

2010041007

Editors: Wendy M. Murray and Lisa Luedeke

Production: Victoria Merecki

Cover and interior designs: Lisa A. Fowler

Typesetter: Kim Arney

Manufacturing: Valerie Cooper

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

15 14 13 12 11 PAH 1 2 3 4 5

*for Bob Skapura
over the years, across the miles
my Mac guru, my WebGuy, my friend*

► CONTENTS

Foreword ix

Acknowledgments 1

Introduction 2

“Abandoned Farmhouse,” by Ted Kooser 12

“Deserted Farm,” by Mark Vinz 22

“When It Is Snowing,” by Siv Cedering, and “Poppies,” by Roy Scheele 32

“Speak Up,” by Janet S. Wong 40

“A Poison Tree,” by William Blake 50

“Summertime Sharing,” by Nikki Grimes 58

“The Wreck of the *Hesperus*,” by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow 66

“Every Cat Has a Story,” by Naomi Shihab Nye 78

“Street Painting,” by Ann Turner 86

“Seeing the World,” by Steven Herrick 94

“Four Haiku,” by J. Patrick Lewis 104

“Tugboat at Daybreak,” by Lillian Morrison 112

“Ode to Family Photographs,” by Gary Soto 120

“Hoods,” by Paul B. Janeczko 130

“Friends in the Klan,” by Marilyn Nelson 138

“Spring Storm,” by Jim Wayne Miller 146

“Foul Shot,” by Edwin A. Hoey 154

“A Hot Property,” by Ronald Wallace 164

“Junkyards,” by Julian Lee Rayford 172

“Nothing Gold Can Stay,” by Robert Frost 180

Paul Janeczko has been a poetry ambassador for many years. His anthologies have helped teachers navigate the many new and sometimes unknown voices in contemporary poetry. If you love poetry, you've probably read at least one of Paul's brilliant anthologies as well as his own excellent poetry.

I first found one of Paul's anthologies over twenty years ago; I thought it was one of the best anthologies of contemporary poetry for young adults I had ever read. As he published more anthologies over the years, I knew Paul had a gift. He has a remarkable, unerring ear for really good poems. You can imagine the thrill I felt when Paul asked me to write a foreword for this book.

Over the years, Paul and I have become friends. His voice in this book is very much like his voice in person: friendly, to the point, always propelled by a keen sense of humor. It's that voice that guides us through the twenty poems he's selected. Listen to him describe how a poem should work in this short sentence: *All the parts should make the poem purr, snarl, crackle, laugh, rumble, or roar.*

We trust Paul, not just because of his track record, but because we know from the way he writes that he is a teacher. Paul taught high school English for many years and is expert at knowing how to invite both teachers and students into the sometimes foreign world of poetry.

Paul has chosen the poems in *Reading Poetry in the Middle Grades: 20 Poems and Activities That Meet the Common Core Standards and Cultivate a Passion for Poetry* with his usual care. The range is brilliant, from contemporary poets like Ted Kooser, the former Poet Laureate of the United States, to classic poets like Robert Frost and William Blake.

He then uses a repeating blueprint to help us traverse the landscape of each poem. We learn about a poem's reason for being, we're told about its structure and poetic elements, we're shown how to listen to the music of the poem, and, in one of my favorite sections, After Reading: Knowing the Poem Forever, we explore the poem's "truths and ideas" that are "portals to a deeper exploration."

One of the ways Paul invites students to become active learners is through graphic organizers that help students know a poem from the inside out. For example, he asks students to draw a scene from Mark Vinz's mysterious "Deserted Farm" to deepen their understanding of the poem. Imagery is a perfect doorway into their appreciation.

By the time you finish reading and teaching from *Reading Poetry in the Middle Grades: 20 Poems and Activities That Meet the Common Core Standards and Cultivate a Passion for Poetry*, you and your students will feel as if you have traveled to twenty new countries with Paul, met new friends and old, and become infinitely wiser about the world of poetry.

Georgia Heard

► ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thank you to my merry band of Lit Divas: Susan Bean, Connie Burns, Cindy Christin, Donna Knott, and Carole Koneff.

Thank you to Judy Wallis for offering her professional perspective and suggestions to the project.

► INTRODUCTION

*F*irst, an admission: I wish the culture today was one in which I didn't have to work so hard to convince others that poetry counts. On a lot of levels. When a poem is presented well, you'll see students who have been quiet suddenly look up, speak up. The poem has awakened something. A few days later, you might discover alliteration showing up in students' writing, or unusual word choice, or sentence variety. In the midst of a literature discussion, a student might refer to a poem you just read, taken by surprise that poet and novelist painted the mood in the same way, or had arrestingly different takes on prejudice, love, or loss.

As teachers today, everything we teach has to be turbocharged with skills and the promise of advancing our students academically. I know that. And here's the cool thing: poetry can get you there. It is inherently turbocharged. Poets distill a novel's worth of content and emotion in a handful of lines. The literary elements and devices you need to teach are all there, powerful and miniature as a bonsai tree. So in this book, I have gathered twenty poems that students tend to love and, for each one, lesson ideas that help you meet language arts requirements. The signature feature that sets this book apart from others is a response sheet in the form of a graphic organizer. In my work in classrooms, I've found there is something about the openness of these organizers that helps students jump over their fear of a poem and dive into personal, smart, analytical responses.

I am confident that by book's end you'll see lots of ways to bring poetry more often to your teaching, but for now, I want to touch upon two "high demand" challenges the lessons in this book were written to address:

- Student Engagement
- The Common Core Standards for English Language Arts

Student Engagement

If our students aren't motivated to learn, we can take our marbles and go home. Nothing we read aloud or model will stick if they are disengaged by the content or stay silent because our talk is overtaking too much of our day together. For years,

we've talked about the crisis of student engagement, and yet we seem to spin our wheels when it comes to changing our teaching to provide the experiences and interactivity that lead to engagement. Personally, my own change as a teacher often comes about after I've talked to one inspiring colleague, tried one new activity with students, or read one book that really engaged me. In other words, none of us needs to swim a sea of professional resources; just find a couple you trust and go forward—now. For inspiration, Daniel Pink's new book, *Drive*, reminds us that creating a state of flow is critical to learning and engagement. If you're not familiar with the research on flow, the groundbreaking book, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, is another must-read. For considering lesson design, I recommend reading the work of Judith Langer. A researcher who has done a great deal of work in grades 6–12, Langer suggests four principles for creating an engaging classroom. As you read the lessons in this book, you will see how they mirror these four principles:

1. **Social interactions** are focused on students thinking about what they know, the ideas they are developing, where they situate themselves as learners. Students are treated as a capable, lifelong learners.
2. **Questions are central** to experiences. They invite students to reflect, explore, and move ahead.
3. **The students look ahead (not back at what they once thought) toward the new ideas** they can develop. Every action—reading, writing, thinking (alone or with a group)—pushes students toward new learning.
4. **Multiple perspectives are considered**—growing naturally out of differing goals, values, experiences, and understandings.

The Common Core Standards for English Language Arts

The poems and activities possess the themes, swift pacing, ownership, and chance for collaboration that preteens and adolescents need in order to learn best. Try them with your students—I think you'll discover a high level of engagement. But the second critical need we have as teachers is to assure that we are using literature content to enhance students' reading, writing, and thinking as outlined by state, local, and national standards. To help you see how the poems and activities in this book address the common core standards for English language arts, I created the chart in Figure 1. It's by no means complete—there are more poems and lessons in this book that hit these and other standards too. But I share it to get you thinking about how you can quite easily look up the standards online and create your own grid of matching content and teaching to them. Listening and Speaking is another category of the ELA standard that is beautifully answered by poetry and its oral tradition; in fact the Say It Out Loud section for each poem in this book abounds with creative ways to develop students' ability to “think on their feet” and perform.

English Language Arts Standards for Reading: Literature

Lessons and Activities

KEY IDEAS AND DETAILS

- 1. QUOTE ACCURATELY** from a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text.

“A Poison Tree”

- **Tone organizer:** reading poem and answering questions about the feelings of narrator.

“Speak Up”

- **Noticing Character:** reading poem and making inferences about both speakers.

- 2. DETERMINE A THEME OF A STORY,** drama, or poem from details in the text, including how characters in a story or drama respond to challenges or how the speaker in a poem reflects upon a topic; summarize the text.

“Friends in the Klan”

- **Getting to Know the Poem:** students respond to the theme of courage in terms of how Carver responded to threats by the Klan.

“Junkyards”

- **Meeting the Poem:** students discuss the notion of “progress” and the poet’s attitude toward it.

- 3. COMPARE AND CONTRAST** two or more characters, settings, or events in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., how characters interact).

“When It Is Snowing”

“Poppies”

- **Details and Senses organizer:** students compare and contrast the sense details used in each poem.

“Every Cat Has a Story”

- **Sense Details organizer:** students compare and contrast the attributes of the cats described in the poem.

CRAFT AND STRUCTURE

- 4. DETERMINE THE MEANING OF WORDS** and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative language such as metaphors and similes.

“Tugboat at Daybreak”

- **Noticing Figurative Language:** students explore the metaphors that Morrison uses.

“Spring Storm”

- **Noticing Figurative Language:** students explore the central metaphor of a storm.

- 5. EXPLAIN HOW** a series of chapters, scenes, or stanzas fits together to provide the overall structure of a particular story, drama, or poem.

“A Poison Tree”

- **Noticing Plot organizer:** students fill in plot boxes to identify the parts of the narrative of the poem.

“The Wreck of the *Hesperus*”

- **Noticing Plot organizer:** students fill in episode blocks to outline the narrative arc of the ballad.

- 6. DESCRIBE** how a narrator’s or speaker’s point of view influences how events are described.

“Ode to Family Photographs”

- **Noticing Mood:** students examine the family photos as a window into family life.

CRAFT AND STRUCTURE *(continued)***"Hoods"**

- **Noticing Figurative Language:** Students explore how the figurative language of the narrator conveys his point of view.

INTEGRATION OF KNOWLEDGE AND IDEAS

- 7. ANALYZE HOW** visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text (e.g., graphic novel, multimedia presentation of fiction, folktale, myth, poem).

"Tugboat at Daybreak"

- **Noticing Mood:** students discuss how the sense details create a sense of quiet.

"Foul Shot"

- **Noticing Active Verbs:** students examine the sequence of action in the poem.

- 8. COMPARE AND CONTRAST** stories in the same genre (e.g., mysteries and adventure stories) on their approaches to similar themes and topics.

"Abandoned Farmhouse"**"Deserted Farm"**

- Students examine the similarities between the setting in these poems.

RANGE OF READING AND COMPLEXITY OF TEXT

- 9. BY THE END OF THE YEAR,** read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poetry, at the high end of the grades 4–5 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

Figure 1

Poems: Perfect Short Texts for Teaching Literary Elements

The grid in Figure 2 gives an aerial view, if you will, of the poems in this book and the craft techniques and literary elements they provide models of. I love how the format invites me to “plug in” new connections that might occur. For example, think about how a particular poem works beautifully with a particular passage in a novel or piece of nonfiction to show students imagery, metaphor, or foreshadowing. Use this grid as a starting point to help you layer your teaching across genres.

The Lifetime Benefits of Learning to Read Poetry

Beyond engagement and standards, I want this book to work in a timeless way to help you and your students read poetry with ease. Sure, it counts for teaching reading and writing skills, but above all, poetry counts in nourishing ourselves and our

POEMS

THEME																					
TONE																					
SCENE																					
STORY																					
HYPERBOLE																					
RHyme																					
ASSONANCE																					
ALLITERATION																					
SOUND																					
VOICE																					
CHARACTER																					
SIMILE																					
PERSONIFICATION																					
METAPHOR																					
STANZA																					
PLOT																					
STRUCTURE																					
LINE BREAKS																					
MOOD																					
PATTERNS																					
REPETITION																					
WORD CHOICE																					
DETAILS																					
IMAGE																					

souls. I like to think that we don't merely *read* a good poem; we experience it. Ted Hughes had that in mind when he wrote that poetry "is not made out of thoughts and casual fancies. It is made out of experiences which change our bodies, and spirits, whether momentarily or for good." I hope you will find that a poem in these pages is something that changes you.

I chose these poems because they seemed to be the right ones to serve as guides for the inexperienced reader of poetry. They are accessible and varied. You'll find poems about the city, poems about the country. Poems by people of color. Poems in various forms, rhyming and free verse. As guides, I trust them to assist readers on their way to a greater poetic literacy. I didn't choose "easy" or childish poems. "Easy" doesn't help a person/reader/writer grow. "Easy" leads to passive reception. I want students and their teachers to grow together in confidence and in their passion for poetry.

I want students to *reach* as they experience different poems. Reach when they encounter unfamiliar words or expressions. Reach when a poem offers a scene that is new to them. Reach when they experience a new feeling. To feel the growth and confidence that comes from exploring new territory. From exploration can come delight, excitement. Those delicious Oh-I-get-it moments that satisfy and encourage a reader to see, feel, hear what else is out there.

I see the journey of poetry in the classroom as a collaboration between teacher and student, as you open a poetic gift together. I'd like this book to be a part of that collaborative process. Teacher and student travel the path together but are not afraid to branch out in another direction, returning with a new poem to share, a wait-till-you-see-what-I-found poem. Teacher and student give and take, speak and listen, read and recite along a path to loving poetry. A path that takes your students and you beyond a poem, beyond your class, beyond this book to a passion that might include a book of poems on a night table, in a backpack, or in a locker, close at hand, ready to engage. A book of poems becomes a constant companion for a quiet moment without the intrusions of Facebook, MySpace, Skype, YouTube. Or, better yet, readers may create a quiet moment *for* a poem.

William Carlos Williams said that a poem is a "small (or large) machine made out of words." He went on to say, "When I say there's nothing sentimental about a poem, I mean that there can be no part that is redundant." I couldn't help but think of the time when my older brother took over the family garage to rebuild the 327-cubic-inch engine in his '67 Chevy. I can still see the parts carefully lined up on the workbench, still recall that intoxicating "garage smell" of gasoline and oil. We examined each part, and he explained its relationship to the other parts and to the engine itself. Each part—piston, camshaft, timing chain—had its role to play in making that engine purr and rumble but also roar when it needed to roar. And so it is with the parts of a poem. All the parts should make the poem purr, snarl, crackle, laugh, rumble, or roar.

What I've tried to do in this book is explore those parts of the poem. So, there will be talk about images and mood, line break and stanza, character and voice, and all manner of figurative language. But it all goes back to the words, doesn't it? Each word carefully chosen and placed in the right spot. Those parts of the machine that make it run. As Robert Francis observed, "One word cannot strike sparks from itself; it takes at least two for that. It takes words lying side by side to breed wonders." From those wonders comes a reader's joy. That's what I hope you and your students will discover: a passion for poetry as you experience the wonders that Francis describes. The world of poetry is a wonder-full place.

I trust you'll use this book in a way that best suits your needs and the needs of your students. Strictly speaking, the poems are not in any sequence, so you can jump around among the units without losing a sense of progression in the book. However, you might decide to start with Ted Kooser's haunting poem, "Abandoned Farmhouse" and work your way through all twenty units.

But before you decide how you want to use the book, I'd like you to read all the poems in it. I hope you find some of your favorites among them. I'm sure you'll meet some poets you recognize. See what the poets have to offer. Which poems do you like the most? Can you recognize how certain poems or terms fit into lessons you have already planned for your class? Perhaps you'll decide to use Janet S. Wong's poem for two voices, "Speak Up," when your students are reading a novel about racism or stereotyping. You might want to include "Friends in the Klan" by Marilyn Nelson or "Summertime Sharing" by Nikki Grimes during Black History Month. If you do skip around in the book, you may find a reference to a term or technique that I mentioned in one of the units you skipped. But that's a minor issue.

I encourage you to keep your own writer's notebook and write in it whenever your students are writing in theirs. It is the perfect way for you to make *Reading Poetry in the Middle Grades* your book. Beyond the underlining and margin jotting that I urge you to do in it, I hope that you use your writer's notebook as an extension of my book. You might want to divide your notebook into twenty sections, one for each unit in this book, and add to each section anything that will help you make the lesson a richer experience for your students. For each unit you can add new poems and online resources that compliment the material I offer. Perhaps a colleague will suggest a novel that relates well with a poem. Perhaps you've tweaked the writing suggestions. Or you had a brainstorm for an oral presentation of "Every Cat Has a Story." Write it all in your notebook and it will become invaluable.

I hope you encourage your students to be active readers of the poems. To read them with pen in hand, underlining parts of the poem that they like or that they find puzzling. Circling words that they enjoy. Using the margins to write questions to be raised during class discussion. To help students feel that they have room to comment on the poem or question parts of it, each poem is printed on a separate page, with lots of white space around it for note taking.

Below each poem is a box where students can jot down observations and questions about the poems. One of the first questions I always ask a class after they read a poem is, "What did you notice about the poem?" I suggest you ask your class the same question. The box below each poem is where they can write some answers to that question as they read each poem. Marking the poems and jotting down questions is a private matter for your students. I want them to feel that this box is their space. They can keep whatever they write there as private as they choose. Of course, my belief is that as they increase their confidence about their developing poetic literacy, they will be eager to share their questions and observations with the class.

Figure 3 illustrates how I marked the first poem in the book, "Abandoned Farmhouse" by Ted Kooser.

Figure 3

Abandoned Farmhouse, Ted Kooser

man
 • left his Bible
 • left in nervous
 haste

woman
 Circumstances

Fam
child

He was a big man, says the size of his shoes
 on a pile of broken dishes by the house;
 a tall man too, says the length of the bed
 in an upstairs room; and a good, God-fearing man,
says the Bible with a broken back
 on the floor below the window, dusty with sun;
 but not a man for farming, says the fields
 cluttered with boulders and the leaky barn.

A woman lived with him, says the bedroom wall
 papered with lilacs and the kitchen shelves
 covered with oilcloth, and they had a child
says the sandbox made from a tractor tire.
 Money was scarce, says the jars of plum preserves
 and canned tomatoes sealed in the cellar hole.
 And the winters cold, says the rags in the window frames.
 It was lonely here, says the narrow country road.

Something went wrong, says the empty house
 in the weed-choked yard. Stones in the fields
says he was not a farmer; the still-sealed jars
 in the cellar says he left in nervous haste.
 And the child? Its toys are strewn in the yard
 like branches after a storm—a rubber cow,
 a rusty tractor with a broken plow,
 a doll in overalls. Something went wrong, they say.

NOTES

• The ~~They~~ say tell us about the people +
 the farm
 • 13 times - "say" or "says"
 • A poem in evidence
 Did something happen to the child for the
 toys to be left behind?

3 8-line stanzas
 Part one

Obviously, neatness doesn't count, and it's important that your students understand that. This is where they can wonder and speculate. They might note the repetition of a word or a sound. They might notice a rhyme scheme. They might underline a few words that they need to look up in the dictionary. They can also use the space to ask questions about a poem, like "Why did the poet use this title? What does it have to do with the poem?" Or, "I *loved* the rhythm at the very end of the poem." Or, "I just don't get it. What's she talking about?"

When students interact with a poem in this way, they will be more likely to contribute to a class discussion about the poem. Their writing about a poem will be more solidly based on the text of the poem. I would encourage you to make a point of commenting when a student sees something in the poem that you hadn't noticed, saying something like, "I didn't notice that" or "I never thought of that." Also be aware of the *kinds* of things that your students notice and add them to your list of things that they might look for in other poems. Once something has been brought up by a student—say, punctuation in a poem—you can remind the class when they read the next poem to see if punctuation affects the way a poem reads. You can even post a list of such discoveries in the class as a reminder. Gradually, the class will build a substantial list of things to look for in a poem.

As you look through the book, you'll notice that each unit is organized in the same way.

- **BEFORE READING**—This section contains information about what makes the poem tick. Use this section to design a lesson with the featured poem that will engage your students.
 - **Why I Admire This Poem**—This brief introduction to the poem explains what attracted me to it.
 - **Companion Poems**—Here I mention a couple of other poems in the book that have qualities, such as a rural setting or engaging narrators, similar to the featured poem.
 - **Special Words to Work Through**—Because your students have various reading skills, it's important to point out any word play or vocabulary that they should be prepared for.
- **FIRST READING: Meeting the Poem**—In this section I give an introduction to the poem, exploring a few things to consider when you present it to your students.
- **CLOSE READING**—This section prepares you and the class for some of the things that they will be looking at in the poem. This introductory part is followed by a number of sections, specific guides that highlight terms and aspects of the poem that I hope you and your students will notice and discuss. These "noticing" sections will include things like mood, repetition, stanza, and figurative language—in other words, important parts of the machine.

- **AFTER READING**—This is an especially important part of each unit because it takes your students beyond the poem, showing them that a good poem is not merely something to “study” in class. Rather, it should contain truths and ideas that they can explore. The activities in this section are portals to a deeper exploration of each poem.
- **Say It Out Loud**—A poem *must* be read aloud when it is a class assignment, of course, but also when students are reading poems for themselves. This section offers some suggestions for helping the students present each poem to an audience.
- **Write About It**—The poems that I have included in this book will provoke your students to consider and discuss some of the issues that each poem raises. Beyond that, I want students to get in the habit of writing their reactions to poems as a way to better understand (and question) the poems and themselves. This section includes writing prompts to which the students can respond in their writer’s notebook. Suggestions for writing poems and prose pieces are also included.
- **Issues/Themes/Topics for Discussion**—In an attempt to link the poems to other aspects of your classroom discussion, I list a few ideas that you might make part of your class, such as bullying, poverty, and diversity.
- **Book Bridges**—This section lists other books, fiction and nonfiction, that can be connected to the poems in some way.
- **Online Resources**—You can also extend the lesson by using websites that are related to the poems.

Although this is a book about reading poetry, it is also a book about listening to poems. Over time, your students will become better listeners of poetry. They will hear the words and the feelings in a poem. They will hear the music of the words. And as Stanley Kunitz said, if we listen hard enough to poets, “who knows—we too may break into dance, perhaps for grief, perhaps for joy.” I hope your classroom is filled with that dance.

Nothing Gold Can Stay

Robert Frost

Nature's first green is gold,
Her hardest hue to hold,
Her early leaf's a flower;
But only so an hour.

Then leaf subsides to leaf.
So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.
Nothing gold can stay.



- Notes ►
- Observations ►
- Questions ►

▶ NOTHING GOLD CAN STAY

Robert Frost

BEFORE READING

Why I Admire This Poem

I enjoy sharing this poem with students because it does a lot of things well and therefore is a good model for readers who aren't quite sure what makes a good poem. For one thing, "Nothing Gold Can Stay" is only eight lines long, a few sentences. It is an apt example of the economic use of words. Each word, each sound, is important.

Yet in that short space, Frost conveys a theme that is a staple of many works of literature: the inevitability of change. *Nothing gold can stay*, he tells us. And this is a theme students can relate to. They see change all around them, in their families, in their friends. They study it in science, social studies, and literature.

"Nothing Gold Can Stay" is also a good example of how a poet uses the *sound* of language to tell a truth. Frost's use of rhyme, alliteration, and assonance (see page 183) is marvelous and helps hold the poem together.

THEMES, ISSUES, CONCEPTS

- impermanence
- change(s)

LITERARY TERMS

- figurative language
- sound
- alliteration

ORGANIZERS

- Change

Companion Poems

Other poems in this book dealing with change or impermanence that can be used in conjunction with "Nothing Gold Can Stay" are:

- "Spring Storm," by Jim Wayne Miller
- "Junkyards," by Julian Lee Rayford
- "Abandoned Farmhouse," by Ted Kooser
- "Deserted Farm," by Mark Vinz

Special Words to Work Through

As he does in many of his poems, Frost keeps his language simple. However, there are a few words and references in "Nothing Good Can Stay" that might need explanation. Students will need know the meaning of *hue* and *subsides*. In addition, they'll need to understand the Biblical story of the Garden of Eden, particularly the part where Adam and Eve are expelled. Even the peace and plenty of paradise didn't last.

FIRST READING: **MEETING THE POEM**

Write the title of the poem on the board and ask the students what they make of it as a title of a poem. What do they think it means? You might draw their attention to the apparent contradiction: doesn't gold stay gold forever? How can it be that gold cannot/does not stay the same?

After students have suggested some possible explanations, break the class into groups of three or four students and give each group a copy of the **Change** organizer. Have them use it to map out some of their thoughts about cycles and change, which is the theme of Frost's poem.

When the groups have completed their organizers, ask them to give examples of things people do to avoid change. For example, to stay healthy, some people exercise, others take vitamins and supplements. Others choose to have cosmetic surgery in order to remain young looking. Do these practices stop change? Slow it down? Can they think of things that groups—families, teams, nations—do to avoid change?

CLOSE READING: **GETTING TO KNOW THE POEM**

Theme is one of the more elusive literary terms to define. Consequently, many young readers have difficulty understanding it and knowing its role in a poem. Some students have been taught that theme is the “meaning” of a poem, “what the poet is trying to say.” The problem is that explanations like these often distract readers from the *words* of the poem, send them on a detour from experiencing the poem. I've always believed that poetry readers should focus on what the poet *is* saying rather than on what we *think* he or she is “trying to say.”

How then to define theme? Most reference works call it the abstract idea made concrete in a poem or work of prose fiction. I like to think of it as a larger truth that an author conveys in a particular work. Looking at the metaphors in “Nothing Gold Can Stay,” we see the larger truth that Frost is stating, which is the certainty of impermanence.

An important thing to remember about theme in a work of literature is that it is how *one person* sees the world or a portion of the world. No theme should be taken as a moral certitude. You students should feel free to disagree with how a poet sees the world.

Noticing Figurative Language

We can understand the theme of this short poem by examining its metaphors, especially in the first stanza, where Frost lays out one of his beliefs about life. The metaphors in this poem may be challenging for your more literal-minded students, but you can help them by looking at the stanza line by line and asking some leading questions:

- *Nature's first green is gold.* How can green be gold? It helps if your students understand that gold is a symbol of something precious and valuable. Those first shoots and leaves symbolize rebirth and new life and are equally precious, and therefore *gold*.
- *Her hardest hue to hold.* Frost is not speaking literally, of course. He means that the *first green* is the stage of growth that goes by the most quickly.
- *Her early leaf's a flower;/But only so an hour.* These two lines reinforce what Frost has stated in the title and the opening lines: the quick passing of time, the impermanence of the fresh green shoots and leaves of spring. Again *only an hour* isn't literal; Frost is using hyperbole to make his point.

The first stanza introduces the theme of this poem: things of life change very quickly. Frost continues in this vein in the second stanza with references to Eden ending sadly—it *sank to grief*—and every day passing quickly—*So dawn goes down to day*—and finally his repetition of the title in the final line—*Nothing gold can stay*.

Noticing Sound

Frost does a number of interesting things with sound in this poem. Your students are likely to recognize that the poem is written in couplets—pairs of lines with end rhymes—with the rhyme scheme *aabb ccdd*. These end rhymes help hold the poem together. You should also point out that the final couplet brings the poem to a firm conclusion.

Have your students find the alliteration (repetition of initial consonant sounds) that Frost uses:

- Line 1: *green/gold*
- Line 2: *her/hardest/hue/hold*, continued to line 3: *her*
- Line 7: *dawn, down, day*

He also repeats other sounds skillfully:

- Line 3: *er* in *her early*
- Line 4: *o* in *only so*
- Line 7: *o* in *so/goes*

A master like Frost uses sound to give heft to a poem; we mustn't overlook this as we focus our attention on the meaning of the words.

AFTER READING: KNOWING THE POEM FOREVER

Say It Out Loud

Too many visuals can distract an audience from the performance of a poem, especially a quiet poem like “Nothing Gold Can Stay.” However, I think a subdued slide show can be an effective backdrop, especially given the theme of

impermanence. A handful of photos that show the change of seasons, for example, would do nicely.

As far as performing the poem, I see the even-numbered lines as responses to the odd-numbered lines; it can therefore be performed by two voices:

Nature's first green is gold,	Her hardest hue to hold,
Her early leaf's a flower;	But only so an hour.
Then leaf subsides to leaf.	So Eden sank to grief,
So dawn goes down to day.	Nothing gold can stay.

It can also be performed by two small choruses, say eight students in each, each group reciting one line.

Write About It

Have students explore one of these ideas in their writer's notebook:

1. Write about something you thought would never change but did, in fact, change. Was it a change for the better? Or did it make you feel sad, angry, betrayed?
2. If you live in a part of the country that experiences a change of seasons, write a short personal narrative that shows the change you like the most or the least and why.
3. If you live in a place that does not experience significant seasonal changes, write about your reasons for liking/disliking that. If you wish you could experience a significant change of seasons, write about why.
4. Make a list of things you wish would never change.

Issues/Themes/Topics for Discussion

- Change
- Impermanence
- Trying to hold on to something/someone
- Changing friendships

Related Poems

"I Still Have Everything You Gave Me," by Naomi Shihab Nye

"Enchantment," by Joanne Ryder

"The Poem That Got Away," by Felice Holman

“The Changeling,” by Siv Cedering

“The Christmas Cactus,” by Liz Rosenberg

Book Bridges

I Found a Dead Bird: The Kids' Guide to the Cycle of Life and Death by Jan Thornhill. A book that explores the cycle of life and death in nature, while exploring how death affects all of us and offering some strategies for coping with a death.

Each Little Bird that Sings by Deborah Wiles. Comfort Snowberger's family runs a funeral home in their small southern town. Even though Comfort has been around death, she is unprepared for the sudden death of her beloved uncle.

Online Resources

- You will have no trouble finding information about Robert Frost, who is an American icon. A great place to start is at the Frost page on the website of the Academy of American Poets (www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/192). Not only does the page contain biographical information about Frost, there is also a good introductory selection of his poems. One of the external links is to “A Frost Bouquet,” which includes many illustrations and photographs related to the poet and his family.
- Another worthwhile link is www.frostfriends.org, which includes a chronology, a reading list, a biography, and The Robert Frost Tutorial “for students with questions.”

Name _____ Date _____ Class _____

Change

Make a list of things that change—big things or little things. The change can be a quick change—your friend suddenly isn't your friend—or a gradual change—a change of season.

Once you have a list of between fifteen and twenty things that change, organize them into categories. For instance, you might have a group of items that relate to the physical body or sports. Use a different box for each category.
